

~~with numbers two and three combined.~~ I prefer the Theravadan order but generally teach the first two contemplations together.

1. While breathing in long, one knows: "I breathe in long." While breathing out long, one knows: "I breathe out long."
2. While breathing in short, one knows: "I breathe in short." While breathing out short, one knows: "I breathe out short."

These first two contemplations move from a simple awareness of breathing to the particular qualities of the breath, a change in focus that happens quite naturally. Most commentators agree that the Buddha meant more than long and short here; he was talking about all the qualities of the breath. As we become more familiar with breathing, we perceive subtle nuances in it.

Sometimes the breath is very fine, like silk or satin; it enters and exits freely. How wonderful just to be breathing! At other times it is coarse, more like burlap; it fights its way in and out. Sometimes the breath is so deep and smooth that it affects the whole body, relaxing us profoundly. Other times it's so short and pinched, hurried and agitated, that our minds and bodies are like that, restless and uncomfortable.

It's hard to know what comes first, whether the problem is in the breathing, the body, or the mind. Each part conditions the others. As we practice longer, we come to see that these distinctions are false anyway; these supposed parts of us are really just one thing. But the breath is an extremely sensitive psychic barometer.

One of the things you learn about this whole process—the conjunction of mind and body, with the breath as the meeting place—is that awareness has an extremely powerful effect on it. This isn't a matter of controlling, or attempting to change, the breath. But as you pay attention, the quality of the breathing changes, perhaps because thinking is diminished. The breath be-

comes deeper, finer, silkier, more enjoyable, and the body starts to bear the fruits of that, to become more relaxed.

This isn't something to try for. Trying actually prevents it. It just reflects the power of mindfulness. You find yourself growing angry or worried; your heart starts to pound, your body to grow tense; but if you can just be with the breath for a while—not suppressing the emotion, but breathing with it—all that changes. The mind grows calm. As the breath goes, so goes the body. Something happens when mindfulness touches breathing. Its quality changes for the better.

That is a part of what you learn from these first two contemplations, noting not just whether the breath is long or short but all the other effects it has as well. This attention to the breath has tremendous consequences.

But it is important to emphasize, in discussing the art of meditation (and the practice as you continue it becomes an art, with many subtle nuances), that you shouldn't start out with some idea of gaining. This is the deepest paradox in all of meditation: we want to get somewhere—we wouldn't have taken up the practice if we didn't—but the way to get there is just to be fully here. The way to get from point A to point B is really to be at A. When we follow the breathing in the hope of becoming something better, we are compromising our connection to the present, which is all we ever have. If your breathing is shallow, your mind and body restless, let them be that way, for as long as they need to. Just watch them.

The first law of Buddhism is that everything is constantly changing. No one is saying that the breathing should be some particular way all the time. If you find yourself disappointed with your meditation, there's a good chance that some idea of gaining is present. See that, and let it go. However your practice seems to you, cherish it just the way it is. You may think that you want to change, but that act of acceptance is in itself a major change.

It has the dynamic power to take your mind into stability and serenity, which are at the core of the first four contemplations.

# HITTING THE TARGET

One place where ideas of gaining typically come in, where people get obsessive about the practice, is in the task of staying with the breathing. We take a simple instruction and create a drama of success and failure around it: we're succeeding when we're with the breath, failing when we're not. Actually, the whole process is meditation: being with the breathing, drifting away, seeing that we've drifted away, gently coming back. It is extremely important to come back without blame, without judgment, without a feeling of failure. If you have to come back a thousand times in a five-minute period of sitting, just do it. It's not a problem unless you make it into one.

Each instance of seeing that you've been away is, after all, a moment of mindfulness, as well as a seed that increases the likelihood of such moments in the future. Best of all is to go beyond the whole mentality of success and failure, to understand that our lives are a series of alternations between various states. If you already had some kind of laser-like attention that never wavered, you wouldn't need to practice meditation at all. The object of these first two contemplations isn't to make your breathing perfect. It's to see how your breathing really is.

One summer morning some years ago I observed a master of Zen archery give a demonstration for the sangha. Nearly 150 people were present, in a large open field. He had set up a target and was in full Japanese regalia, with robes and wrist guards and all kinds of paraphernalia. There was an elaborate ceremony before the arrow would be released and—we all hoped—would hit the bullseye, all kinds of chanting and ritual gestures. The moment arrived, and we could feel the tension. The master pulled back the bowstring with the arrow. We were holding our breath. It seemed forever that he held it there. Then he suddenly shifted and shot it

into the air. There was a huge groan from the crowd. The archer burst into laughter.

He was letting us know that the obsession with a target was not the point. We in the West have a very strong "in order to" mind. We want to go from A to B, B to C. Ideally we'd like to go from A straight to Z, get our Ph.D. the first day, skip all the steps in between. Enlightenment in one easy lesson. Our mind spends all its time calculating. Everything is a means to an end.

But that misses the point. Each breath moment is both a means and an end. We're not looking at the breath in order to get to enlightenment. We're just looking at the breath, rooted to it, sitting with it like a lion. Enlightenment, after all, is just one more bone. It's an idea we have.

The instruction is to disappear into the breathing and leave all the bones behind, all the preoccupations, worries, plans, fears, all the stuff that makes up the mind. And when we get caught up in them again, to return gently to the breath. Especially in the modern world, where everybody is so impressed with variety and complexity, so desperate to be entertained, it is a relief to settle into this simple repetitive act. The opportunity we have, of staying with the breathing, constantly coming back to it, is a chance to do one simple, ordinary thing well, to treat it with great care and respect.

Entering into this spirit of repetition can also be a wonderful lesson in simplicity, which is also desperately needed in the modern world. Many people come to meditation expecting some complex practice leading to an extraordinary experience. They can't believe they're just supposed to sit there and watch the breath. But when we learn to surrender to one simple object, we begin to see how useful this skill is in other aspects of our lives. How many times do we brush our teeth, go to the bathroom, put on our clothes, make the bed? Our days are dominated by such ordinary and repetitive activity, which we generally handle by going on automatic pilot. That means that we miss out on much of our

lives. This practice teaches us to stay fresh in the midst of all routine activity, really to live our lives.

Practice with Ajahn Maha Boowa in Thailand provided dramatic training in this spirit. Each meditator was given a little hut, called a *kuti*, in the forest. The huts were all connected by paths, ways, and leaves fell from the trees all day long. Twice a day, morning and evening, we'd get a broom and sweep our path. Even as we were doing it, we'd see leaves starting to cover the place we'd already swept, giving us an opportunity to take joy in the job even as we watched it being undone. Much in our lives is like that, when you think about it.

I've given the instructions for meditation a staggering number of times. I usually manage to stay fresh in that situation, but I sometimes hear myself droning on in a metallic voice, and that is my reminder to wake up. I come back, the same way I come back to the breath. When I pay attention, the same old instructions take on a new life.

So the constant repetition of coming back to the breath has real value. Our wish always to hit the target, always be doing it right, is an obstacle. We start to blame ourselves: *I don't know how to do this, I'm a bad meditator, everybody else is concentrating but me. If only my mind didn't wander, I'd be able to practice.* But seeing that the mind has wandered is practice. If you continue for years, you'll have to come back, who knows, millions of times. So learning to come back gracefully is extremely important. Make it a dance, not a wrestling match.

Another aspect of the practice—and this is somewhat beyond the contemplation we're dealing with, though some of it is bound to happen even when you're just looking at the breath—is that we begin to see the nature of the bones we keep chasing. The core of the practice, once we've developed some concentration, will be to look at these bones. Certain things come up again and again. "He said, then she said, then I said, then we . . ." Or, "If that works out I might . . ., but on the other hand I could . . ." It's rather obvious, from the fact that these things keep coming up,

that your obsessive thinking doesn't resolve them. They also don't usually involve the highest priorities of life. Maybe, when you see that, you won't chase after them quite so much. You'll see how futile it all is.

There's a word in the Yiddish language—*yenta*—that describes this phenomenon. A *yenta* is a neighborhood gossip, who knows everybody's business, always knows what's going on, is always trying to poke around and stir things up. You begin to notice that the mind is one big *yenta*, talking about others, berating itself, pointing out how it used to be better, seeing how it might improve. Life, on the other hand, keeps on being just the way it is. We begin to see that all our ideas about how it should be take up far too many of our precious breath moments. We need to begin just to see life—and accept it—as it is.

## RESPECTING EACH MOMENT

In the tradition of Jewish mysticism, the Hassids believe that each person has been given a certain corner of the universe to take care of. You might be president of the United States or a clerk at the corner candy store, a mother of ten or a mechanic who lives alone in a small apartment, but everyone has a world, and whatever is in your life at a given moment is your world. For me, at this moment, it is trying to present these words clearly. For you it is trying to make sense of them. Our world is always present. This is our world, now.

It is therefore always appropriate to ask: What is my situation? What am I supposed to be doing, right here, right now? When you're in the car, your task is to drive. When your child comes to you with a problem, your task is to listen. Each moment has its own intelligence. Just as you follow the breathing, you direct yourself to that task. When you drift away you, come back. Again. And again.

As we begin to see clearly when we practice, the mind is chasing bones constantly, not just when we're sitting. Sometimes, if

what you're doing is quite simple, you have a chance to examine that: What is it that keeps pulling me away? (It may be that there is something else that you need to do, or undo.) Other times, if what you're engaged in is vital and complicated, your task is to keep coming back to that. It's a matter of having respect for your activity. Ultimately, you're having respect for your life.

In some ways this entire practice, everything the Buddha said, is concerned with having respect—an infinite respect—for life. That's what living dharma is finally about. It's one of the things that Mother Teresa has shown us: that the poorest of the poor, in the last moments of their lives, are worthy of total regard. So are the most ordinary events in our lives.

Most of us respect some things and not others. We pay attention to an important business meeting but not to our children when they're talking to us. We watch the latest Hollywood blockbuster but don't listen to the birds in the trees. We exult in our good moods and try not to notice our bad ones. We're riveted to our tennis game but don't notice our footsteps as we take out the garbage.

Our practice constantly reminds us that everything is worthy of attention. The ant walking across the floor. The piece of fruit you're eating. Each breath. These things are our lives, moment by moment. If we don't notice them, we don't make contact with the full vividness of life.

It is a great, though rather common, mistake to think that the practice just involves sitting. It's wonderful to have a place where you can reliably get calm—if sitting does that for you—but you don't want to create a split between that part of your life and the rest, seeing one as more important than the other. Our practice is nondualistic. Buddha Dharma is world Dharma; world Dharma is Buddha Dharma. Living wholeheartedly involves being fully present in whatever your life is at a particular moment.

One of the most famous examples of wholeheartedness, one of the most frequently told Zen stories attributed to the Buddha, concerns the time when he appeared before a large group of medi-

tators and held up a flower. He was known to be a great teacher, to have a deep teaching, so all the yogis wondered what he could possibly mean by such a gesture. But Maha Kassapa just smiled, experiencing the flower, with no thinking in the way. The Buddha smiled back. That was a great and notable transmission of the teaching, because that monk was fully present to what was there.

The ancient Chinese Zen masters referred to those times when we're not quite present, when we're divided from what's happening—often by thought—as killing life. Sometimes the Buddhist precept against killing is interpreted in that way. We're killing the moments of our life when we're not fully living them, not experiencing them. When we are fully present, we are giving life to life.

That is the real reason that the Zen archer didn't worry about the target. The target is everywhere. When Dogen gave instructions to the cook, he was very clear on this matter. You give the same attention to a soup of wilted greens that you do to a gourmet cream soup. You give the same attention to an ordinary meal that you give to one for visiting dignitaries. And if you are interrupted at the task—even by Manjushri Bodhisattva—you chase him from the kitchen. Your attention is centered on what is before you.

So this simple instruction, which seems to be just about the breath, is really about much more. To be mindful of something—of anything—is an act of generosity. You are giving it life by allowing it into your world. But the greatest benefactor—because you're showing respect to your own life—is you. The real target is the archer.

## M O V I N G I N T O T H E B O D Y

In these first two contemplations, though many other things come up, we're studying a basic phenomenon of nature. We see what a deep breath is, when we feel the breath way down in the belly, perhaps even feel subtle breath sensations in other parts of

Pure vipassana practice—this is to give a preview of where things are headed—begins with the thirteenth contemplation, where you see into the nature of the object and see that all things are impermanent. You might from that vantage point go back and study impermanence with the other contemplations, seeing that the breath itself, for instance, arises and passes away.

“I already know that,” you might say. Well, you do. And you also don’t. There are deeper kinds of knowing, progressively deeper levels, until finally the knowledge becomes internalized. We become so in touch with things that we are the Dharma. That implies a great letting go, of course, which is usually the fruit of endless practice. Two billion times we attach to something, and finally on the two billion and first we don’t, because we see that our attachment only makes us suffer and doesn’t change things. We become at one with how things are.

Even this early in the practice, as we begin to perceive certain truths—that attention deepens the breathing, deep breathing relaxes the body—a faith develops that wasn’t there before. We need some faith in order to launch a practice and to keep it going until we actually experience the fruits of our efforts. The Buddha is asking in all these teachings that we examine the outcome of practice to see if the teachings are true. Buddhism isn’t about beliefs. It’s about firsthand knowledge.

#### THE BODY AS AN OBJECT OF NATURE

This third contemplation opens up a profound subject that has elicited a great deal of commentary through the centuries. The *Anapanasati Sutra* in general is a kind of dharma telegram, extremely concise, which many commentators have elaborated on. It also, as I mentioned before, goes hand in hand with the *Satipatthana Sutra*, which outlines the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the first of which is the contemplation of the body. Ultimately, this third contemplation focuses on the true nature of the body.

Many of us identify totally with the body, believing we are

the body, in the back and sides, in the feet and toes, in the hands. We see what a shallow breath is, when it doesn’t seem to go much beyond the chest. We see all the subtle gradations in between. We begin to notice how the rest of the body is when we breathe deeply and when we don’t, not trying to change any of that, not trying to breathe differently, just seeing how it all works. That moves us rather naturally into the third contemplation.

3. One trains oneself: “Sensitive to the whole body, I breathe in. Sensitive to the whole body, I breathe out.”

This third contemplation also marks a distinct change. The breath is no longer an exclusive object; it recedes into the background, though it remains a clear and constant aid to presence. In a sense we’re examining two bodies, seeing how the body of breath influences the body of flesh and blood. It has a powerful effect. The act of breathing begins our life as we come out of the womb; in our last moment, when we cease breathing, our life is over. It only makes sense that the breath should also have a profound influence on all the moments in between.

As the breath becomes deeper and finer, smoothing out a little—which happens naturally as your continuity of attention develops—we may find that the body becomes more relaxed, and we can sit for longer periods with ease, with fewer problems of physical pain and numbness. The breath becomes pleasant; it is enjoyable just to sit and breathe. The mind, which has been scattered, chasing after bones, begins to settle in on itself. The body, the mind, and the breath begin to coalesce. They each partake of the other, so that it is difficult to distinguish among them.

This isn’t a trance, just a wonderful feeling of peace and stability. It doesn’t happen just to people who live in the Himalayas or who lived a thousand years ago. Many modern Westerners have already experienced the lawfulness of this process. As we experience this feeling of stability, real vipassana practice begins to be possible.

our bodies. That is obviously an extremely strong attitude in our culture, with health-care products, health food stores, exercise studios, tanning salons. Our culture worships young, thin, healthy, beautiful bodies, and most of us (since few of us have such a body, and none of us has one for long) strive after that ideal.

The other side of the coin—and people sometimes alternate between these two states—is revulsion with the body, an utter alienation from it. That might develop as we bulge here and there, start to wrinkle, go gray at the temples. But it is also a prominent feature of the spiritual world, and always has been, reflected in practices that demean and deny the body, trying to act as if—with all its wants and needs—it doesn't exist.

In a way Buddhism is between these two views; in another way it is beyond either of them. There is no question, according to the Buddha, that the body exists. But it is also true that—except conventionally, and perhaps legally—it isn't yours. In a profound way, we don't own our bodies.

A little simple observation will let us know that the body does just what it wants and that we aren't in control. It tells us when it's hungry, when it's full and doesn't need more food (we don't listen to that very well), when it has to go to the bathroom, when it's tired and needs to sleep. We can ignore these requests, of course, but only at our peril, and we can't ignore them forever. The body is in charge. And no matter how many vitamins we take, how much exercise we do, how perfect our diet is, our body's reaction is finally unpredictable. We don't—to name only the most obvious example—know when it is going to give out on us altogether. Our fate is strangely intertwined with this fragile and unpredictable object known as a body.

The Dharma attitude is not to neglect the body. There's nothing wrong with keeping healthy or looking good, as long as you're not attached to the process. It's rather like the attitude of a cavalry rider to his horse: of course he's going to take care of it. The exploration of the body—undertaken by means of the breath—is

an opportunity to examine a marvelous and intricate aspect of nature. It's more intimate than the moon and the stars, or the plants or the animal kingdom, because you're in it. And as you look into it and see its true nature, there is liberation in that seeing.

Take something that we've already noticed: that attention to the breath can relax and condition the body. That in itself is a powerful fact to have seen, and it gives you an indirect way to take care of the body. When you've seen that enough times, again and again, it becomes something you've mastered. You know it, in a way much deeper than just saying it.

## SETTLING INTO THE BODY

There are various techniques for moving gracefully from a focus on the breathing to the larger field of the body. One is the way we've already mentioned, which comes about naturally: just pay close attention to the breathing, and as you gradually become stiller, you will begin to notice breath sensations throughout the body. Blockages will work themselves out over time, and you will feel yourself in touch with a field of energy we are calling the whole body.

It is also possible to use a formal, more directed method to enter into the body more systematically. You can begin a given sitting with the breathing, and when you've calmed down a bit, move your attention through the body, focusing on one part after another. Breathing in, breathing out, you notice sensations or their lack in the scalp; breathing in, breathing out, you notice the forehead, then the eyes, the nose, the back of the head, the ears, and so on.

This is not a visualization and doesn't involve thinking. You just experience the sensations in these places. You go into your right eye, for instance, and see what you can feel there. You stay in a place as long as you want, and move your way down through the body, being careful not to lose touch with the breathing.

may feel blocked or dead, but you don't worry about that. They become enlivened in time. Eventually you find that you can feel subtle breath sensations throughout the body.

All of these exercises have the effect of bringing the mind, the body, and the breath together, so that they form a unity. That is one of the central aims of the third contemplation. When we begin this practice, there is an observer and a process he or she is observing. But in time that boundary—which has been imposed upon us—disappears. Everything is a part of everything else. There is an incredible stillness and calm.

#### THE BODY'S ULTIMATE FATE

Another way to focus on the body—death awareness—sounds more radical, but it also comes from the *Satipatthana Sutra*. In ancient times, the yogis would actually go to the charnel grounds after someone died and observe the process of decomposition. They would camp there for extended periods of time to observe a single body, but there were many bodies around, and they also might move from one to another, observing the various states of this process.

We can't do that, but the Buddha left behind an extensive series of images detailing what happens. All of these contemplations arouse profound feelings, such as fear and revulsion, so you don't want to try them until you're ready. But the process can be an important one, as you visualize various stages your body will eventually go through. In the charnel grounds, there would be various bones lying around, a leg bone here, a shoulder blade there. That is one of the stages to contemplate. Finally, of course, the bones dissolve and there is just dust. The wind blows away the dust.

That is our ultimate fate. There's no doubt about it.

The point of such contemplations isn't to create a sense of morbidity. It's just to balance out the idealization of the body,

Once you do that a few times, you can, as a supplementary practice, add reflections on various body parts. You can reflect on your eyes, how precious they are, the fact that many people don't have vision, while you do. You can reflect on all the wonderful things that come in through your eyes. It's a way of no longer taking things for granted. You can do that with every organ and with the whole body. This practice is especially helpful when a meditator is feeling down, when everything seems to be going wrong. Moving through the body can show you all that is right in your life and revitalize your interest in practice.

The idea is not to develop the kind of attachment to the body that we spoke of before but to appreciate this body that has been entrusted to us for a given number of years. It becomes a rich contemplation. Not only do you get to know the body better, but you use the breathing to know something other than breath, an ability that is vital for this sutra. It can lead to increased concentration and decreased attachment, an appreciation without clinging.

The first four contemplations prepare us to enter what are known as the *jhanas*, eight highly concentrated states, each defined by increasing refinement, in which—by becoming more at home in the body, laying to rest any blockages of energy, learning to sit in a stable and comfortable way—we provide an opportunity for the mind to become deeply absorbed. Anyone who has practiced for a while will acknowledge with deep respect the importance of a calm and concentrated mind. Without some degree of serenity and stability, we can't absorb the Buddha's teaching. We are gradually equipping the mind to learn.

In another directed meditation, you pick a region of the body—the pelvis and abdomen, for instance—and see what breath sensations you can feel there. The abdomen, of course, is one of the most common sites for following the breathing, but in this kind of guided meditation you direct your attention to specific spots, the left side, the right, the back, and so on. If you have time, you cover the entire body. Some parts, when you first move into them,